

Baylor business students participated in a unique research conference solely for undergraduates when they joined students from across the country for the fourth annual Economics Scholars Program (ESP) last March at the Federal Reserve Bank in Dallas.

ENGAGING UNDERGRADS IN RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

by Chad Shanks

RESEARCH  IN ACTION

The ESP conference, a collaborative effort between Austin College and the Federal Reserve Bank, is a one-day undergraduate research conference designed to provide students the opportunity to share and gain feedback on original research, giving a forum for students already researching and inspiration to those considering their own research agenda.

Tisha Emerson, associate professor of Economics, attended the previous ESP conference and recruited and prepared students for this year's event.

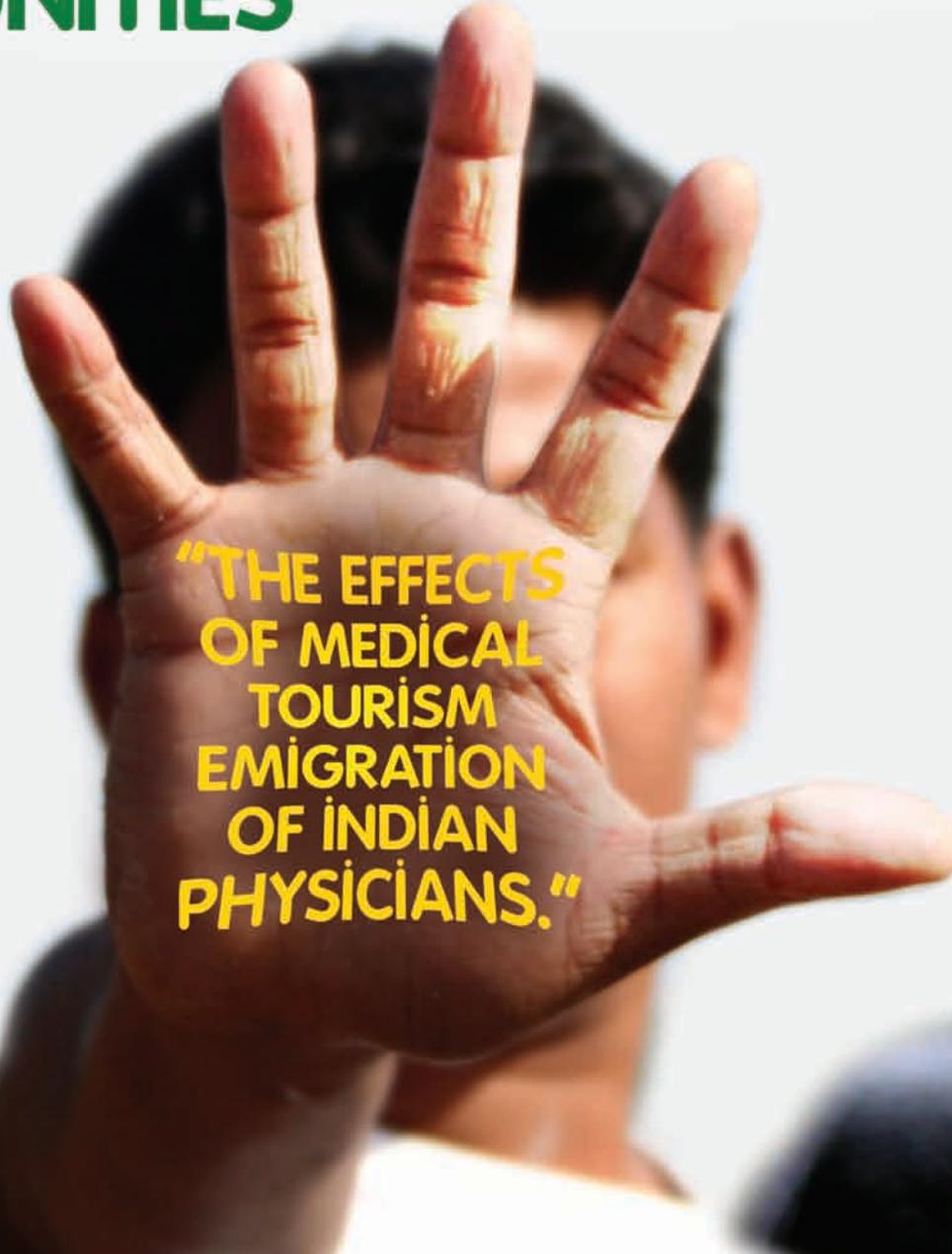
"This is the only conference solely for undergraduates in economics,"

Emerson said. "There are other conferences where undergraduates can present, but they're alongside graduate students and professionals, which can be intimidating for them. This conference is a very special opportunity for them."

At the conference, students assumed one of three distinct roles: presenters, discussants and session chairs.

Presenters, as the title would imply, presented the results of research projects — projects that may have been part of previous coursework or intended for a future thesis. Two students presented original research, with Heather Owen presenting "The Role of Economic Theory in Poverty Alleviation Organizations" and Andre Samuel presenting "The Effects of Medical Tourism Emigration of Indian Physicians."

Discussants, who were given copies of the papers in advance, offered critiques of the research in hopes of helping the presenter improve his or her research.



"THE EFFECTS OF MEDICAL TOURISM EMIGRATION OF INDIAN PHYSICIANS."

Senior Baylor Business Fellows, Economics and Finance major Julie Bateman served as a discussant and analyzed a Macalester College student's presentation on economic issues in rural Nicaraguan education.

"I feel like I did a good job because after our presentations, the author of the paper came up to me and told me how much he appreciated the comments and how he thought his paper would be much stronger after he made the suggested changes," Bateman said.

Freshman Philip Spencer planned to attend the conference as an observer, but after a student dropped out, he was given the opportunity to be a session chair. As a session chair, he moderated the discussions, opened and closed sessions, introduced presenters and discussants, and kept the time.

"Even if they aren't presenting, [ESP] provides an opportunity for students (like myself) to see presentations and begin thinking about possible research they might consider doing in the future," Spencer said.

Conference attendees also had the opportunity to interact with each other and discuss the details of business-related research.

"One of the most informative parts of the conference was when we had a round table discussion," Bateman said. "We discussed, as a group, the pitfalls that might be experienced when writing a research paper. The comments that were made were very useful, and I am keeping them in mind as I begin my own thesis."

The Baylor Business Fellows major has the option to write a thesis, but many students are choosing against it due to lack of confidence, Emerson said. She hopes attending ESP will show them academic research as an undergraduate is within their reach and very beneficial.

"In my classes, I assign research projects," Emerson said. "Students will tell me that in internship interviews, they're asked if they have ever done research. Being able to talk about thesis work can help students set themselves apart in this job market."

The Baylor faculty views it as their role to prepare students for the conference, Emerson said. Faculty sponsors and coaches met with presenters and discussants to assist them in organizing their thoughts into manageable presentations.

"When faculty work more closely with students, the outcome is so much better," Emerson said. "At the undergraduate level, they need more guidance, but we know our students' good work has been recognized. Conference organizers and other attending faculty have commented on the quality of our students' work and participation."

Linda Carter, assistant professor of Economics, also accompanied students to ESP. Though this was her first trip, she plans on actively recruiting and encouraging students to participate next year.

"[ESP] helps students become more engaged with their discipline and helps them to have a better sense of what types of questions are out there," Carter said. "Specifically, these types of conferences help them learn to prepare and present research themselves and see a project to completion."

While a research conference may only seem beneficial to students planning on entering academia, the skills learned in the process will carry over to any field, Carter said.

"Research helps business students, especially," Carter said. "If they move into consulting or any related field, they'll have to plan and present ideas and discuss them in teams. Employers will see that as valuable."

The students who attended ESP also learned the value of research for business students.

"Business might not be considered the typical field for conducting research, but there is a lot of research to be done,"

Bateman said. "I think it would be very beneficial for other business classes to require their students to collect and analyze data for research purposes."

The ESP experience has inspired a desire for research, with several of this year's discussants and session chairs wanting to return as presenters. Junior Kiara Hughes attended as a discussant but hopes to return next year to present her own research.

"Undergraduates are rarely able to participate in research," Hughes said. "Even rarer are avenues for undergraduates to present their research. This experience served as an avenue for us, as undergraduates, to know that we have a place in the research field."



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